Baba Yaga

In Slavic folklore, **Baba Yaga** (/ˌbɑːbə ˈjɑːgə/; Russian: Баба-Яга, tr. *Bába-Jagá*, IPA: [ˈbabə jɪˈɡa] (listen))[a] is a supernatural being (or a trio of sisters of the same name) who appears as a deformed or ferocious-looking old woman. In Slavic culture, Baba Yaga lived in a hut usually described as standing on chicken legs.[2]

Baba Yaga as depicted by Ivan Bilibin, 1900

Baba Yaga may help or hinder those that encounter her or seek her out. She may play a maternal role and has associations with forest wildlife. According to Vladimir Propp's folktale morphology, Baba Yaga commonly appears as either a donor, villain, or may be altogether ambiguous. Her depictions vary greatly across tales, ranging from a child-eating monster, to helping a protagonist find his missing bride.

Andreas Johns identifies Baba Yaga as "one of the most memorable and distinctive figures in eastern European folklore", and observes that she is "enigmatic" and often exhibits "striking ambiguity".[3] Johns summarizes Baba Yaga as "a many-faceted figure, capable of inspiring researchers to see her as a Cloud, Moon, Death, Winter, Snake, Bird, Pelican or Earth Goddess, totemic matriarchal ancestress, female initiator, phallic mother, or archetypal image".[4]

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Etymology

Variations of the name *Baba Yaga* are found in the languages of the Eastern Slavic peoples. The first element, *baba*, is transparently a babble word. In Old Russian, *baba* may mean "midwife", "sorceress", or "fortune teller". In modern Russian, the word *бабушка* or *babushka* (meaning "grandmother") derives from it, as does

the word *babcia* (also "grandmother") in Polish. In Serbo-Croatian and Bulgarian, *baba* means "grandma". In contemporary, unofficial Polish and Russian *baba* is the pejorative synonym of "woman" (especially old, dirty or foolish woman). *Baba* may also have a pejorative connotation in modern Russian, both for women as well as for "an unmanly, timid, or characterless man".[4] Similarly to other kinship terms in Slavic languages, *baba* may be employed outside of kinship, potentially as a result of taboo. For example, in variety of Slavic languages and dialects, the word *baba* may be applied to various animals, natural phenomena, and objects, such as types of mushrooms, cake or pear. This function extends to various geographic features. In the Polesia region of Ukraine, the plural *baby* may refer to an autumn funeral feast.[4]

These associations have led to variety of theories on the figure of Baba Yaga, though the presence of the element *baba* may have simply been taken as its primary meaning of "grandmother" or "old woman". The element may appear as a means of glossing the second element, *iaga*, with a familiar component. Additionally, *baba* may have also been applied as a means of distinguishing Baba Yaga from a male counterpart.[4]

While a variety of etymologies have been proposed for the second element of the name, *Yaga*, it remains far more etymologically problematic and no clear consensus among scholars has resulted. For example, in the 19th century, Alexander Afanasyev proposed the derivation of Proto-Slavic **ož* and Sanskrit *ahi* ('serpent, snake'). This etymology has subsequently been explored by other scholars in the 20th century.[5]

Related terms to the second element of the name, *Yaga*, appear in various Slavic languages; Serbo-Croatian *jeza* ("horror", "shudder", "chill"), Slovene *jeza* ("anger"), Old Czech *jězě* ("witch", "legendary evil female being"), modern Czech *jezinka* ("wicked wood nymph", "dryad"), and Polish *jędza* ("witch", "evil woman", "fury"). The term appears in Old Church Slavonic as *jęza/jędza* (meaning "disease", "illness"). In other Indo-European languages the element *iaga* has been linked to Lithuanian *engti* ("to abuse (continuously)", "to belittle", "to exploit"), Old English *inca* ("doubt", "worry", "pain"), and Old Norse *ekki* ("pain", "worry").[5]

Attestations

Folktales

The heroine Vasilisa outside of the hut of Baba Yaga as depicted by Ivan Bilibin (1899)

As one of the most famous witches, Baba Yaga has appeared in hundreds if not thousands of folktales in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus predating the eighteenth century. The first clear reference to Baba Yaga (*Iaga baba*) occurs in 1755; Mikhail V. Lomonosov's *Rossiiskaia grammatika* ('Russian grammar'). In Lomonosov's grammar, Baba Yaga is mentioned twice among other figures largely from Slavic tradition. The second of the two mentions occurs within a list of Slavic gods and beings next to their presumed equivalence in Roman mythology (the Slavic god Perun, for example, appears equated with the Roman god Jupiter). Baba Yaga, however, appears in a third section without an equivalence, attesting to perception of her uniqueness even in this first known attestation.[6] However, it is noticeable that, like *Hecate*, Baba Yaga presides-over a wide, diverse array of domains and functions.

In the narratives in which Baba Yaga appears, she displays a variety of typical attributes: a turning, chicken-legged hut; and a mortar, pestle, mop or broom. Baba Yaga frequently bears the epithet "bony leg" (*Baba Iaga kostianaia noga*), and when inside of her dwelling, she may be found stretched out over the stove, reaching from one corner of the

hut to another. Baba Yaga may sense and mention the "Russian scent" (*russkim dukhom*) of those that visit her. Her nose may stick into the ceiling. Particular emphasis may be placed by some narrators on the repulsiveness of her nose, breasts, buttocks, or vagina.[7]

In many tales, there are three Baba Yagas which are often depicted as sisters.[8] For example, in a version of "The Maiden Tsar" collected in the 19th century by Alexander Afanasyev, Ivan, a handsome merchant's son, makes his way to the home of one of three Baba Yagas:

> He journeyed onwards, straight ahead .. and finally came to a little hut; it stood in the open field, turning on chicken legs. He entered and found Baba Yaga the Bony-legged. "Fie, fie," she said, "the Russian smell was never heard of nor caught sight of here, but it has come by itself. Are you here of your own free will or by compulsion, my good youth?" "Largely of my own free will, and twice as much by compulsion! Do you know, Baba Yaga, where lies the thrice tenth kingdom?" "No, I do not," she said, and told him to go to her second sister; she might know.[9]

Ivan Bilbin, Baba Yaga, illustration in 1911 from "The tale of the three royal divas and of Ivashka, the priest's son" (A. S. Roslavlev)

Ivan walks for some time before encountering a small hut identical to the first. This Baba Yaga makes the same comments and asks the same question as the first, and Ivan asks the same question. This second Baba Yaga does not know either and directs him to the third, but says that if she gets angry with him "and wants to devour you, take three horns from her and ask her permission to blow them; blow the first one softly, the second one louder, and third still louder". Ivan thanks her and continues on his journey.[10]

After walking for some time, Ivan eventually finds the chicken-legged hut of the youngest of the three sisters turning in an open field. This third and youngest of the Baba Yagas makes the same comment about "the Russian smell" before running to whet her teeth and consume Ivan. Ivan begs her to give him three horns and she does so. The first he blows softly, the second louder, and the third louder yet. This causes birds of all sorts to arrive and swarm the hut. One of the birds is the firebird, which tells him to hop on its back or Baba Yaga will eat him. He does so and the Baba Yaga rushes him and grabs the firebird by its tail. The firebird leaves with Ivan, leaving Baba Yaga behind with a fist full of firebird feathers.[10]

In Afanasyev's collection of tales, Baba Yaga also appears in "The Magic Swan Geese", "Baba Yaga and Zamoryshek", "By Command of the Prince Daniel", "Vasilisa the Fair", "Marya Moryevna", "Realms of Copper, Silver, and Gold", "The Sea Tsar and Vasilisa the Wise", and "Legless Knight and Blind Knight" (English titles from Magnus's translation).[11] In some of these tales, a Baba Yaga will die only to rise again in another form.[8]

Lubki

Baba Yaga appears on a variety of *lubki* (singular *lubok*), wood block prints popular in late 17th and early 18th century Russia. In some instances, Baba Yaga appears astride a pig going to battle against a reptilian entity described as a "crocodile". Some scholars interpret this scene as a political parody. Peter the Great persecuted Old Believers, who in turn referred to him as a "crocodile". Some instances of the lubki feature a ship below the crocodile, and Baba Yaga appears in what some scholars identify as Finnish dress, and Catherine I, Peter the Great's wife, was sometimes derisively referred to by way of a word referring to Finnish women (Russian *chukhonka*).[12]

Another lubok features Baba Yaga dancing with a bagpipe-playing bald man. In turn, some scholars have identified this as a merrier depiction of the home life of Peter the Great and Catherine I. Alternately, some scholars have interpreted these lubki motifs as reflecting a concept of Baba Yaga as a shaman, according to which the "crocodile" would represent a monster who fights witches. The print would therefore be something of a "cultural mélange" that "demonstrate[s] an interest in shamanism at the time". Contemporary to the production of the lubki, the Finnic peoples still practiced a form of shamanism.[13]

A lubok depicting Baba Yaga and a bald man with bagpipes

According to scholar Andreas Johns, "Neither of these two interpretations significantly changes the image of Baba Yaga familiar from folktales. Either she can be seen as a literal evil witch, treated somewhat humorously in these prints, or as a figurative 'witch', an unpopular foreign empress. Both literal and figurative understandings of Baba Yaga are documented in the nineteenth century and were probably present at the time these prints were made."[13]

Related figures and analogues

Ježibaba, a figure closely related to Baba Yaga, occurs in the folklore of the West Slavic peoples. The name *Ježibaba* and its variants are directly related to that of Baba Yaga. The two figures may stem from a common figure as far back as the medieval period, if not further, and both figures are at times similarly ambiguous. The two differ in their occurrence in different tale types and in details regarding their appearances. Questions linger regarding the limited Slavic area—East Slavic nations, Slovakia, and the Czech lands—in which references to Ježibaba are recorded.[14] Another related figure appears in Polish folklore by the name of *Jedza*.[15]

Scholars have identified a variety of beings in folklore who share similarities of varying extent with Baba Yaga. These similarities may be due to either direct relation or cultural contact between the Eastern Slavs and other surrounding peoples. In Central and Eastern Europe, these figures include the Bulgarian *gorska maika* (Горска майка', 'Forest Mother', also the name of a flower); the Hungarian *vasorrú bába* ('Iron-nose Midwife'), the Serbian *Baba Korizma*, *Gvozdenzuba* ('Iron-tooth'), *Baba Roga* (used to scare children in Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia), *šumska majka* ('Forest Mother'), and the babice; and the Slovenian *jaga baba* or *ježibaba*, *Pehta* or *Pehtra baba* and *kvatrna baba* or *kvatrnica*. In Romanian folklore, similarities have been identified in several figures, including *Mama padurii* ('Forest Mother'). In neighboring Germanic Europe, similarities have been observed between the Alpine *Perchta* and *Holda* or *Holle* in the folklore of Central and Northern Germany, and the Swiss *Chlungeri*.[16]

Some scholars have proposed that the concept of Baba Yaga was influenced by East Slavic contact with Finno-Ugric and Siberian peoples.[17] The Karelian *Syöjätär* has some aspects of Baba Yaga, but only the negative ones, while in other Karelian tales, helpful roles akin to those from Baba Yaga may be performed by a character called *akka* (Karelian for "old woman").[18]

Modern influence

- In 1899, the illustrator Ivan Bilibin depicted Baba Yaga in his illustrations for "Vasilisa the Beautiful", a Russian folktale collected in Alexander Afanasyev's *Narodnye russkie skazki*.
- *Baba Yaga's Assistant* written by Marika McCoola; illustrated by Emily Carroll.[19]
- In the novel *Ask Baba Yaga: Otherworldly Advice for Everyday Troubles* by Taisia Kitaiskaia, the character of Baba Yaga gives advice for contemporary life.[20]

- Baba Yaga appears as a character in the book *The Door By the Staircase* by Katherine Marsh; illustrated by Kelly Murphy.[21]
- In 1964, Baba Yaga appeared in the USSR movie Jack Frost, where she conspires a plan to kill Nastia, to get revenge against Ivanouschka, Nastia's love interest for tricking her. She also sends dwarves to attack them towards the end of the movie, which also doesn't go according to plan. In this movie and a number of other movies of Soviet period Baba Yaga was portrayed by Georgy Millyar, Soviet actor of mixed French and Russian ancestry, famous for his characteristical voice of "evil old woman".
- In *The House With Chicken Legs* by Sophie Anderson, the protagonist's grandmother is a Yaga.[22]
- Under the name "Babs Yagg" she appears in *Vassa in the Night* by Sarah Porter.[23]
- *Dragon Ball* character Fortuneteller Baba is derived from Baba Yaga.
- Baba Yaga appears in the television series *Monsters of the Week*.[24]
- She appears as a minor character in *The Winter of the Witch* by Katherine Arden, the third book in the *Winternight* trilogy that features many characters from Russian folklore.[25]
- Three different versions of Baba Yaga have appeared in the Marvel Universe: the first in *Captain Britain #11* (1985), the second in *Uncanny X-Men #231* (1988) and the third in *Herc #10* (2012).
- Baba Yaga is a recurring character in the comic book series *Hellboy*. She appears in the 2019 Hellboy, played by Troy James and voiced by Emma Tate.
- Baba Yaga is a recurring character in the *Fables* comic book series.
- Baba Yaga appears as a minor character in several of Patricia Briggs books of Mercy Thompson. In her most recent book, *Storm Cursed*, Baba Yaga assists Mercy and her husband Adam Hauptman, while mentioning that Adam smells like a handsome Russian man.
- In Orson Scott Card's *Enchantment* (1999), Baba Yaga is the antagonist in a time-traveling Sleeping Beauty-esque story.[26]
- Baba Yaga appears a supporting character in the 1999 animated film *Bartok the Magnificent*.
- In the animated series *Scooby Doo! Mystery Incorporated*, Baba Yaga and her house are brought to Crystal Cove by some of the main antagonists, who believe that the house contains a piece of the planespheric disc. She also appears in the Halloween special of *Be Cool, Scooby-Doo!* as the episode's villain.
- SCP-352, a part of the SCP Foundation collaborative project, is described as a humanoid maneating creature that superficially resembles a very old woman. The creature was found in rural southern Russia and despite its appearance is far stronger and more agile than a human; it is also described as prefering to hunt children.[27]
- In the Mattel series Ever After High, Baba Yaga is a teacher at the school and appears in many episodes.
- In the 2015 video game *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, there is a DLC (downloadable content) dedicated to Baba Yaga, titled *Baba Yaga: The Temple of the Witch*. The game's setting is in the depths of the Siberia wilderness.
- Baba Yaga appears as an antagonistic NPC in the video game *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow*.
- In 2018, "Baba Yaga's House" (https://www.thecauldronart.com).was an honorarium art project at the annual Burning Man festival in the Black Rock Desert. The 22ft tall chicken-legged sculpture is now permanently placed at The Fly Ranch Project in Gerlach, Nevada. [28]
- Baba Yaga is a character in the fifth season of the The Magicians series.
- As of 2020, Baba Yaga is featured as a playable character in the MOBA *Smite*,[29] created by Hi-Rez Studios.
- Baba Yaga appears the main antagonist of the *Supernatural* season 15 episode "Drag Me Away (From You)." Baba Yaga is depicted as an immortal witch who preys on children who is

fought by the protagonists in both 1993 and 2020. She is killed by protagonist Dean Winchester when he smashes her ring.

- *Yaga* is a 2019 videogame heavily based on the folk tales; it is an action roleplaying game where your choices define your progression, set in the world of Slavic folklore. The players can play as Ivan, an unlucky blacksmith caught between a Tzar giving him impossible tasks, a mysterious witch who wants to manipulate him, and his grandma who wants him to find a wife.
- As of 2020 Baba Yaga is featured as a paid playable character in Fortnite Created by Epic Games
- DC's Legends of Tomorrow shows Baba Yaga as a powerful witch who worked for the Adversary, primarily acting as his spy. She used her abilities to magically alter her appearance into that of Red Riding Hood, so she could infiltrate Fabletown as a new "refugee" seeking asylum.
- Baba Yaga (spelled Jaga) is featured as a minor character in Don't Call the Wolf by Aleksandra Ross and Uprooted by Naomi Novick
- Baba Yaga appears as a minor character in the comic "The Hunt" in the sixth volume of The Sandman (comic book) by Neil Gaiman. She brings the protagonist to his quarry in exchange for the heart of Koschei.

See also

- Koschei the Deathless, common male antagonist in Russian folktales
- Vasilisa the Beautiful, common female protagonist in Russian folktales
- Frau Holle
- Hecate
- The Morrígan
- Yama-uba, a similar character to Baba Yaga, in Japanese folklore.
- Izanami

Footnotes

a. Alternate names for this character in Slavic languages are:[1]
   - Polish: *Baba Jędza*
   - Belarusian: Баба-Яга, romanized: *Bába-Jahá*
   - Czech and Slovak: *Ježibaba*.

Notes

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